

Seabuckthorn

Helga Ahmad



Seabuckthorn. Photo: Ujol Sherchan

A message flew in from the Mountain Forum which forced me out of the role of silent reader and encouraged me instead to share with you all some of my experiences in the valleys of the Karakorum.

During one late autumn trip, I noticed ripe orange berries on thorny bushes, which made memories of my childhood days burst forth. Questioning the locals on how they use these berries, I was amazed to find that only goats and sometimes children eat them. Growing up in the Bavarian Alps, these berries, called Sanddorn, were a homemade cough syrup in most households. During the Second World War, barely any medicine was available. As kids, we spent most of the summer holidays in the forests, collecting herbs, mushrooms and wild berries. These supplemented a nutrient-deficient rationed food diet, and we were fortunate in being surrounded by forests.

With missionary zest, my campaign progressed wherever I found this bush growing. I became very familiar with its local name, though the English translation required a German-English dictionary. “Seabuckthorn” became my dream from then on, as its ecological benefits are enormous for this mountainous terrain. People must have thought me deranged, but Memsahibs are generally humoured. In the end nothing came of it, other than my final exit from this area on the back of men and donkeys. Sadly, the after effects of multiple fractures never allowed me to climb up to these areas again.

Years later, while in Gilgit, someone shouted: “Madam, Madam!” Curious, I stopped and there he was, that man from Nagar, who used to translate my ‘sermons’ on seabuckthorn into the local language.

Some years back his whole family fell ill (he has 8 children) and he was forced to borrow from relatives. His meager income made it difficult to make ends met during the coming months. However, the following autumn, with seabuckthorn berries hanging heavy on the branches, he went off into the thorny shrub-woods with his clan to cut berry-laden

branches, which were then collected in baskets and carried home. The berries were removed from the stems by the nimble fingers of his children and carefully cleaned by the elders. Then a clean cloth was spread in one of the rooms, where the berries were left to dry. After that, cotton bags stitched by the girls, were filled and whenever wheat was being ground, handfuls of dried berries were added. Nutrient-rich bread was always on the table.

My 'sermons' had focused on the benefits of the juice: at least 3 teaspoons per person per day were required. So my friend designed a juice press with his nephew, a welder. I was thrilled with his practical approach of how to work out the amount of berries required for 30 teaspoons of juice a day. Easy. Take a spoon and measure the amount of juice one kilo of berries provides. He also experimented with the residue by feeding a specific quantity to his cow. After one week the family had 25% more milk. The berries also can be dried and the husks mixed into the local bread or biscuits, while precious oil is extracted from the seeds.

I was able to collect recipes on sweets and jams and slowly we made progress. Unfortunately, the water used for domestic consumption is badly contaminated, so it is difficult to prepare a marketable product. I am still seeking an organisation that can train people on how to produce marketable products from their homes. This man has been using his mind and is keen to find employment with some of the international groups working on "saving the environment" in that part of the world, as he is an excellent teacher. His shortcoming is that he only speaks broken English.

With ICIMOD's publication on seabuckthorn in hand, I tried to explain at different forums and government institutions the enormous benefit if this plant is promoted, to the Northern Areas, which is also the watershed of Pakistan's river systems. The intensive root system of the plant helps to prevent landslides and rockfalls. With no awareness in that region of the importance of the plant to the ecology of their region, more and more of this shrub wood is falling to the fuel wood seeking axes.

Helga Catrina Ahmad (rina@comsats.net.pk) is a Mountain Forum member living in Pakistan. At the age of 72, she is now unable to get out into the mountains as much as she would like. As well as helping to develop the use of seabuckthorn, Helga is involved with the Girl and Boy Scout movement and dreams to work with them in the Northern Areas of Pakistan.